

Kol Nidre - 5784  
Rabbi Eli Perlman

The wife of the mayor of a Jewish Shtetl was told that she did not have very long to live because nobody in her family ever lived longer than she was now. Hearing this, she called in a portrait artist. She said to him:

"I vant dat you should place mine likeness on the easel. Don't make me look as old as I really am or too young eider, but make me look exactly as I look, specially mine gorgeous, shining eyes dat light up the entire room ven I walk in."

The portrait painter said he would be honored to preserve her likeness on canvas.

"Now, I vant to say unto you dat if you happen to have any paint left ova, can you add som'em else?"

The painter nodded and said of course he could.

"Please, on mine right and on mine left wrist, paint beautiful bracelets mit diamonds and red rubies and green emeroids. I vant dat these should look like they are sitt'n in a shiny platinum settin'. Den I vant you to make me a necklace that goes around mine neck. Vunce again, I vant it should be on shiny platinum mit diamonds and red rubies and green emeroids. Un hang'n from da necklace I voud like a very big diamond dat is even more bigger dan the Hope Diamond. Ay, such a beautiful diamond it should be. Oh yea, can you make sure dat all the jewels sparkle like mine gorgeous eyes?"

"That would be no problem, your majesty, but why add the jewelry that you are not wearing?"

Vell, everybody knows dat mine husband is a no goodnick. I know dat as soon as I'll be dead, even ven mine body is still varm, that shtunk will remarry some young petutzi.

"Your majesty, knowing your husband I cannot argue with what you just said, but I still do not understand what is the deal with all this jewelry?"

"You should know that when mine husband's new young petutzi should see your magnificent verk, she vill go crazy spending the rest of her life look'n for dem."

On this evening of Yom Kippur, we just heard the haunting chant of Kol Nidre. There is absolutely nothing about those words that could possibly bring a tear to the eye unless you are an attorney like our congregation's president, Andy Schrager. That is because Kol Nidre is not a prayer. Kol Nidre is a legal statement that releases us from not fulfilling the promises we made to G\*d. It has nothing to do with promises we made to our fellow human beings.

The anti-Semites have said that it frees Jews from paying our debts, but that is a complete fabrication. The Kol Nidre is limited only to those deals we made with G\*d when someone we love got sick, or was in a serious accident, or got in trouble for something they should not have done, or we wanted something very badly and promised G\*d that if our prayers would be answered, we would do this or that in return.

Since we did not meet our end of the bargain, this evening we came to ask G\*d to forgive us for the oversight. The tears we have are triggered by that awesome melody, not by the words.

So, why am I telling you this? To answer this question, I have to go back exactly 50 years to 1973. As you may know, I was in the US Army Special Forces during the Vietnam era. Since the Special Forces was called back home due to the political climate, when I returned to the States, I was trained in EOD, Explosive Ordinance Disposal. My specialty? Disarming rogue nuclear weapons.

Proudly qualified to wear the Green Beret, and having been trained in EOD, I was in high demand since I could parachute anywhere in the world and help dispose of just about any explosive threat, nuclear or otherwise. Of course, since I was in my early 20s, and with my special training, I had the confidence to step into just about any situation with the belief that I could successfully achieve my mission.

Getting back to 1973, 50 years ago, I was given orders to go to the airport where an F14 would fly me to a certain city in the southern part of the United States. I was briefed while in the air as to what was happening. I have never spoken of this publicly since the incident due to security. Even now, 50 years later, I will be a bit vague for the same reason.

It seemed that a disgruntled retired US Air Force pilot had somehow done what was considered impossible. As a retirement gift to himself, he had relieved the Air Force of a nuclear device.

After leaving the military, he became a pilot for a large US commercial airline. On this particular day, he had set the explosive device in his luggage and had it checked into the belly of a plane that was full of passengers. He threatened to detonate the nuclear explosive if he did not receive \$500m in unmarked bills. There is no doubt that if that bomb had been detonated, it would have killed many millions of people in the southern part of the United States. My mission was to get on the plane and neutralize the threat.

A team of five of us was brought together to neutralize the explosive. I was the only member of the military on the team, as the mission was being managed by a three-letter civilian agency that did not begin with an "F".

We changed our clothes and dressed like a maintenance-crew. The pilot was assured that the money was on its way, but that the plane needed refueling and maintenance so that after the pilot received his ransom, he could safely leave.

The five of us entered the baggage compartment. The pilot's luggage with the explosive device was not difficult to find. Because of my training, I took the lead in disarming what was inside. Unfortunately, when I removed the isotope from the device, the lead shield slipped off. The vulgarity I used did not change the fact that the five of us were being exposed to fatal amounts of radiation; especially me since I was holding the source in my bare hands. Remember; we were dressed like a maintenance-crew, so wearing protective clothing was never an option.

Since my mission was to neutralize the device, I did. When I determined there was no longer a threat, I reported the situation to the three letter civilian agency who then sent in the authorities to arrest the pilot and check the safety of the passengers. They also airlifted my team and me to Walter Reed Hospital in DC. By the time we arrived, we were told that we had little chance of surviving the radiation poisoning. In fact, within 48 hours, it had taken the lives of three of the team members and five days later, G\*d took the fourth.

That left me. Obviously, since I am standing here speaking with you, I did not die. If I did, nobody bothered to tell me. My survival baffled every single one on the medical team. So, why did I live? Let me tell you why.

First, after a few days, I had become totally paralyzed. I could not move a muscle, but I could breathe, blink my eyes, make certain verbal sounds, and hear, but I could not form words or move any of my extremities. My skin turned a greenish color and within a week, my hair, fingernails, and toenails had fallen out. I was in so much pain, death seemed like a great option.

Do you know why I did not give up. The answer is simple. My love and respect for my parents. I saw how they suffered when someone they knew lost a child. They cried and hurt right along with those inconsolable parents. I was certain that their pain of losing a child, especially this way, would be much worse than any pain I had. I refused to give up.

How did I do it? While I thought I knew how to pray, up until that moment, I realized I had only been saying words.

Most of the time, those words were without much meaning. Now, I was finding a much deeper spiritual something inside. Since I could not talk or form words, I could make sounds. I started to hum a familiar melody that my father (T"zl), a highly respected cantor, had taught me even before I could walk. It went like this (hum Kol Nidre). As I hummed, a newfound sense of spirituality encircled me. While G\*d did not talk to me or appear before me, I could feel a sense of Divine closeness as my humming continued (hum Kol Nidre). No, I was not praying for myself, but rather I was praying that my parents should not suffer from what I thought would be my imminent journey to the world to come. The humming continued (hum Kol Nidre).

When the medical team came in and gave me the bad news that I would either exist with this excruciating pain in a paraplegic state for the rest of days so I would probably give up and die after going into shock, I remember thinking the same vulgarity I said on the plane. I remember focusing on the big toe on my right foot with all I had. I saw it, but the toe remained still. I kept focusing and focusing on it. Move! Move! Move! I thought as I continued humming that haunting melody (hum Kol Nidre).

Then it happened, I saw my right toe move ever so slightly. I redirected my focus onto my left big toe. Then all my toes on each foot. It took everything I had to get them to move. All I kept thinking was, "G\*d, please do not let my parents suffer!" as my humming continued (hum Kol Nidre).

That journey from moving that right toe and humming the haunting melody of the Kol Nidre eventually brought me here to you to share my story for the first time on this night.

Along the way, the damage caused by that eventful day did leave a bit of a mess behind, but I am so grateful to G\*d for bringing me here to you. In the meantime, I have had one laminectomy on my cervical spine, two laminectomies on lumbar spine, one titanium shoulder, two titanium hips, one titanium knee, with the other scheduled for replacement this December 27<sup>th</sup>, and no ankle on my left leg with a titanium rod that goes from the heel of my foot almost to my knee.

This is minor compared to all the good that I have enjoyed in my life. That good comes from my undying love for my family, my G\*d, the TaNaCh, and living as a proud Jew. That is why I always say and mean that I never had a bad day.

Unlike that pitutzi that I told you about who will be spending the rest of her life driving herself crazy looking for those non-existent jewels, I already found mine for they are you. Have you found what is missing in your lives? If not, let your belief in Judaism and G\*d help you as it did me.

Shana Tova